

## NEWS RELEASE

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### Virginia Celebrates Fair Housing Month

***“Keepers of the Dream” fight for every family’s right to live  
in the home of their dreams, in the neighborhood of their choice***

**RICHMOND** – The Virginia Fair Housing Office announces Fair Housing Month, marking the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic Fair Housing Act. The landmark civil rights legislation was enacted April 11, 1968, and each April the nation honors the occasion by rededicating itself to equal housing opportunities for all. This year’s theme – *Keepers of the Dream* – describes the role fair housing agencies play in ensuring every individual’s and family’s right to live where they choose, free from discrimination.

**“Housing discrimination is not always as obvious as a bigoted remark or a slammed door,”** says Mary Broz, spokesperson for the state agency that enforces fair housing laws through the Virginia Fair Housing Office.

**“Equally illegal are subtle forms of discrimination, such as a ‘no-children’ policy or a refusal to provide reserved parking spaces for physically disabled tenants,”** Broz reminds consumers.

Virginia’s fair housing statute prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, familial status (defined as having children under age 18), and elderliness (defined as age 55 and older). The law protects people from bias when trying to rent an apartment, buy a house, obtain a mortgage, or purchase homeowner’s insurance. Fair housing requirements apply to all housing providers – property managers, owners, landlords, real estate agents, banks, savings institutions, credit unions, insurance companies, mortgage lenders, and appraisers.

For example, certain illegal housing practices include:

- Applying one set of rental criteria for blacks and another set for whites.
- Claiming a house has been sold when, in fact, it is still available.
- Steering homebuyers to a specific neighborhood, or steering renters to a specific location within a complex.
- Enforcing a “no pet” policy against a blind tenant who needs a seeing-eye dog.

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Since the U.S. Congress added disability as a protected class in 1998, the number of fair housing complaints based on disability has steadily increased. If the trend continues – which is likely as our population ages and experiences legally protected disabilities – reports of disability-based discrimination may eclipse those based on race as the most frequent type of fair housing complaint.

The Fair Housing Act requires accessible design and construction of multi-family housing units to accommodate people with disabilities. To increase compliance with the accessibility rules, Virginia's Fair Housing Office initiated a partnership with the Virginia Society of the American Institute of Architects. The joint effort will increase awareness among architects about the value and necessity of designing accessible and adaptable housing, specifically with regard to multi-family complexes.

**“Accessible housing is increasingly important these days, even for individuals who are not physically disabled themselves,” Broz says. “If your mother-in-law needs to move into your home as she ages, you will notice quickly any ways in which your home is inaccessible for the mobility-impaired.”**

**“And each of us, regardless of age or physical ability, can benefit from grab bars in a slippery shower.”**

Core design and construction requirements for accessible multi-family housing include:

- An accessible building entrance on an accessible route (for example, no stairs leading up to a front door).
- Accessible and usable public and common-use areas (i.e., pools, parking lots, vending areas).
- Doors that can be used by persons in wheelchairs (i.e., 32” widths rather than 28” widths).
- An accessible route into and through the dwelling unit.
- Accessible light switches, electrical outlets, thermostats, and other environmental controls.
- Reinforced bathroom walls for future installation of grab bars.
- Usable kitchens and bathrooms, allowing an individual in a wheelchair to maneuver about the space.

**Individuals who believe they may be victims of housing discrimination should contact the Virginia Fair Housing Office toll-free at 1-888-551-FAIR (3247). The agency also offers free informational seminars to housing consumers and providers who wish to learn more about their rights and responsibilities under the Fair Housing Act.**

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**About DPOR and Fair Housing**

The Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation (DPOR) administers and enforces laws regulating 31 commercial occupations and certain professions. The agency licenses or certifies more than 258,000 individuals and businesses ranging from architects and contractors to cosmetologists and professional wrestlers.

DPOR investigates reports of regulatory violations by licensees; pursues complaints of criminal activity by unlicensed practitioners; responds to business-related consumer inquiries and requests for license checks; administers recovery funds for consumers harmed in contractor or real estate transactions; and conducts mediation services and public awareness campaigns.

The Virginia General Assembly established the Fair Housing Board in 2003. Prior to July 1, 2003, fair housing issues and cases fell under the jurisdiction of the state Real Estate Board. The Real Estate Board continues to handle cases involving real estate licensees or their employees. Each board investigates housing discrimination through the Virginia Fair Housing Office, which operates under the aegis of the Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation (DPOR).

For more information, visit DPOR online at [www.dpor.state.va.us](http://www.dpor.state.va.us).